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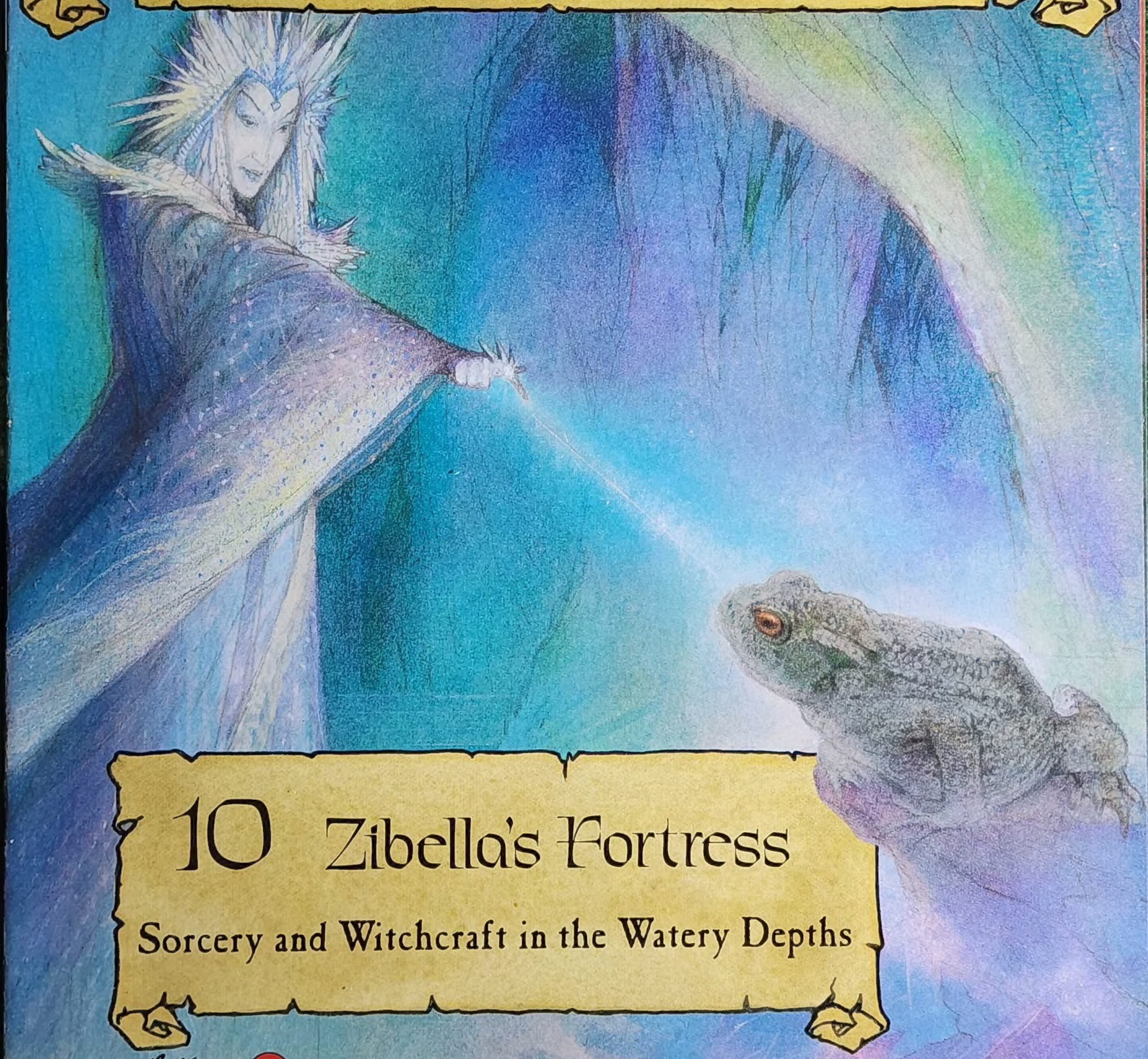
10

IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



10 Zibella's Fortress

Sorcery and Witchcraft in the Watery Depths

Juliet Heller

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Tenth Day . . .

Landing from the witches brew,
In spellbound lands of fear.
Battle nightmares, one then two,
Ending three in crystals clear.
Revoke the spell – the book will tell,
Testament's beginnings see.
Add four elements, make a spell.
Say the word that sets them free.

Yellow flames and smoke filled the wood behind them as Richard, Orkan and Melek leaped into the lake. The three hit the water together, and now they were swimming vigorously. Their one aim was to get to the opposite shore as quickly as possible. There was no telling how safe the water was. If the earth itself could catch fire there was no reason why the lake should not, too.

Weighed down by the *Book of Prophecies* on his back, Melek could barely keep his head above water.

"Are you okay?" Richard asked the dwarf, swimming alongside him.

"Yes, I'm fine," Melek spluttered back. "I'll get the hang of it soon."

Melek was as good as his word. Before long, he was moving forwards with a slow, but steady breaststroke, while Orkan thrashed along in his wake like a paddle steamer. Richard swam behind them, ready to help if they got into any trouble.

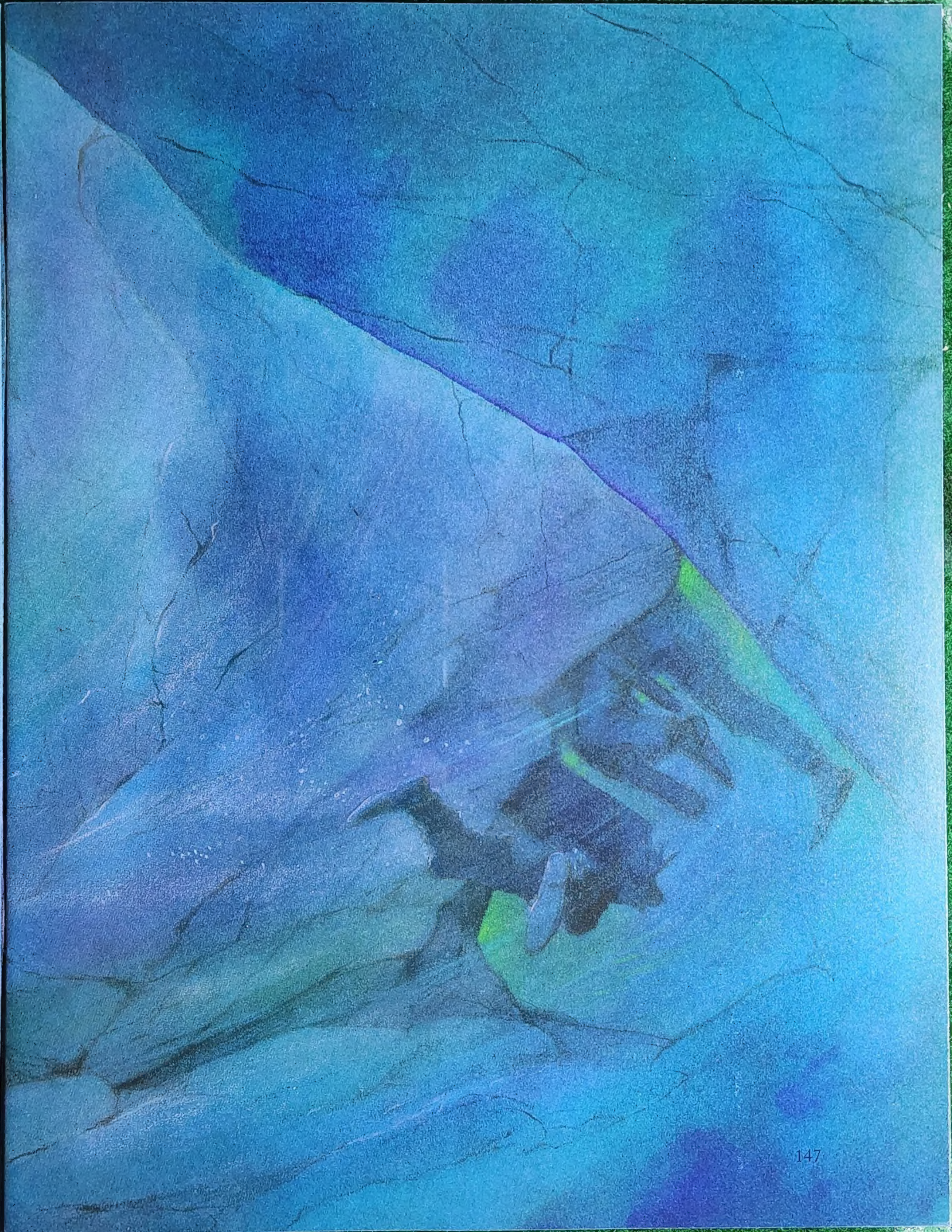
From dry land the lake had looked quite narrow, but now they were in the water, it seemed much wider. As they swam along, Richard could have sworn it was getting wider still. After a while, he turned his head to check how far they had come. He saw the same expanse of blue. There was no shore, no sign of land, no hint of anything but water.

Richard trod water for a moment, trying to grasp the situation. As he did so he felt a tugging at his feet, as if a current was pushing him to one side. He called to Orkan and Melek, but his words were drowned by a sudden throaty gurgling. An enormous plug seemed to have been pulled out from the bottom of the lake. The current gripped him with its full strength.

WALL OF DEATH

Richard had heard of whirlpools, but he had never seen one. Now he was in one, pinned to a swirling wall of water that sank straight down into the lake. Below him, swept along by the same circular current that had suddenly risen from beneath the surface, Orkan and Melek were being carried down into a cauldron of spray.

Noise was everywhere – gurgling, splashing, a jumble of buffeting sounds that drowned everything else. The three whirled round in ever-decreasing circles. The sky grew dimmer, the noise louder. Orkan and Melek had already disappeared. Now it was Richard's turn to vanish beneath the spray.



Richard landed painfully on a cold, stone floor. Beside him, the other two were rubbing their wet, bruised bodies.

"Where are we?" Richard asked. "What's happened?"

"Magic," Melek said. "Listen to this." He read from a soggy page in the *Book of Prophecies*.

"You're right," Richard said after Melek had finished. "Witches' brew describes that whirlpool perfectly. We must be on the shores of the lands of fear."

Richard looked around. They were in a cave. A faint red glow from a single rocky passage provided the only light source.

"We don't have much choice," Richard said, heading for the opening. The others squelched after him.

Shrinking passage

As the trio made their way through the passage, the walls seemed to be moving closer together. The roof was getting lower. Then they heard a loud crunch behind them, as roof, walls and floor met in a rocky kiss.

"The tunnel's closing up," Richard shouted. "Run!"

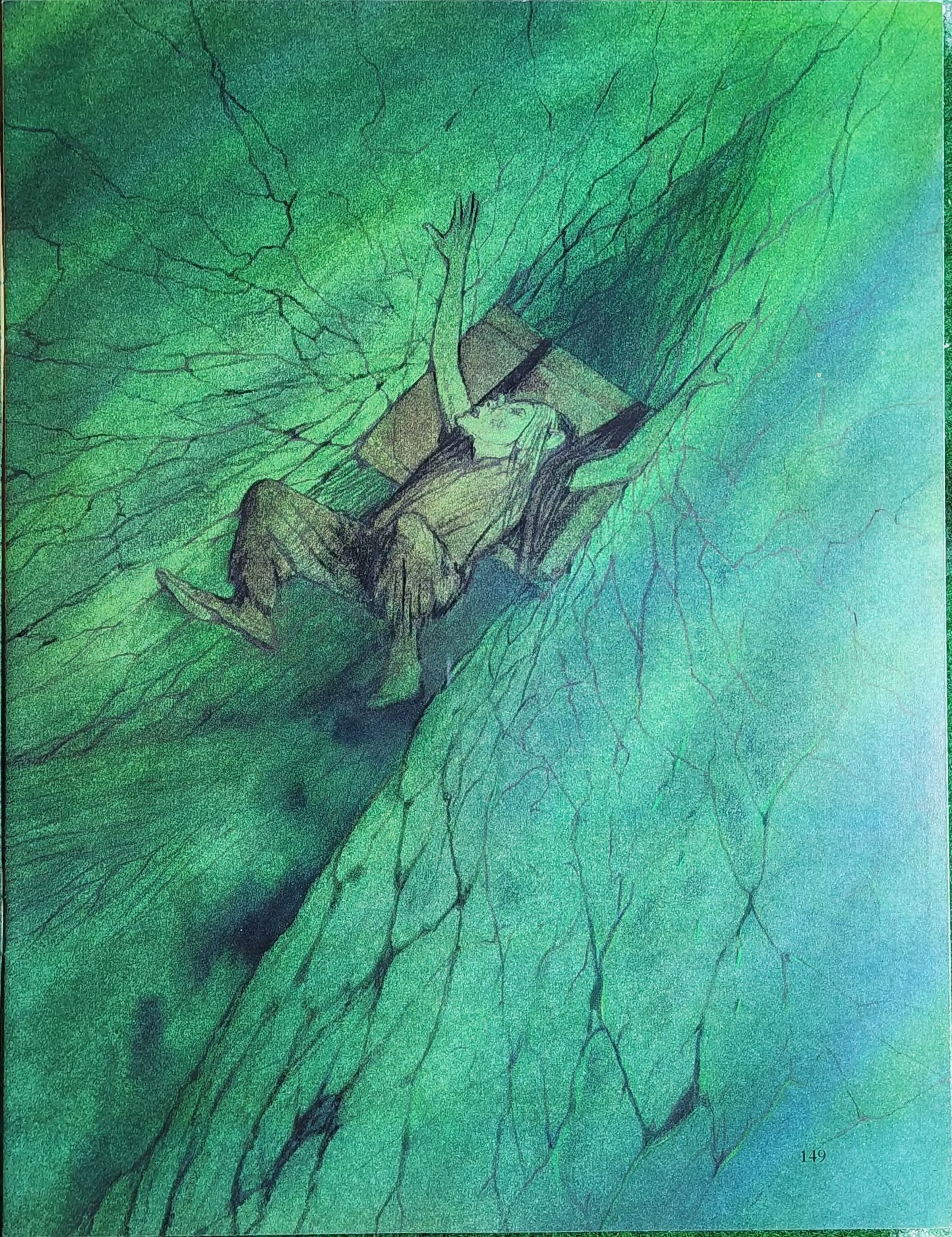
They stumbled along, chased by a gritty rumble as the passage steadily squeezed shut in their wake. Rounding a corner, they saw that the passage was closing in front as well as behind. Through its narrowing opening, they glimpsed the safety of a cave.

Trapped in a gap

Richard and Orkan made it in time, but just as Melek was about to dive through, the walls nipped him neatly by the book on his back.

Orkan leaped forward and helped Melek wriggle free from the straps which bound him to his load. Richard made a grab for the book, but it was stuck fast, its leather cover creaking under the pressure.

Richard drew his dagger and began battering the rock with its hilt. At last, he was able to loosen a stone enough to snatch the *Book of Prophecies* free. Then the tunnel closed with an angry snap.



A shaken Melek strapped the book back on to his shoulders while the others took stock of their surroundings.

Once again, they were in a cave with only one way out. Richard was about to speak, when the tunnel floor seemed to come alive, creeping towards them, rustling, twitching, crawling – a brown mass interspersed with flickers of red.

Rat attack

Suddenly thousands of beady red eyes were staring at the trio.

"Rats," Richard yelled. "Thousands of them!"

"Get to the tunnel's mouth," Orkan ordered, his soldier's training coming out. "If we can catch them there, we'll have a chance. If they surround us in the cave, we're finished."

Orkan drew his sword and jumped, slashing and stabbing into the horde of rodents. Richard and Melek hurried to protect his back, and together the three forged their way down the passage.

For every one of the beasts they killed, another took its place. There seemed no end to them. Then Richard noticed that each time Orkan's sword slashed through a rat, its corpse vanished. Not all at once, but slowly, until there was nothing left. Looking behind him, he saw the tunnel floor was hazy with ghostly shapes that dwindled fainter and fainter, until they finally popped out of existence altogether.

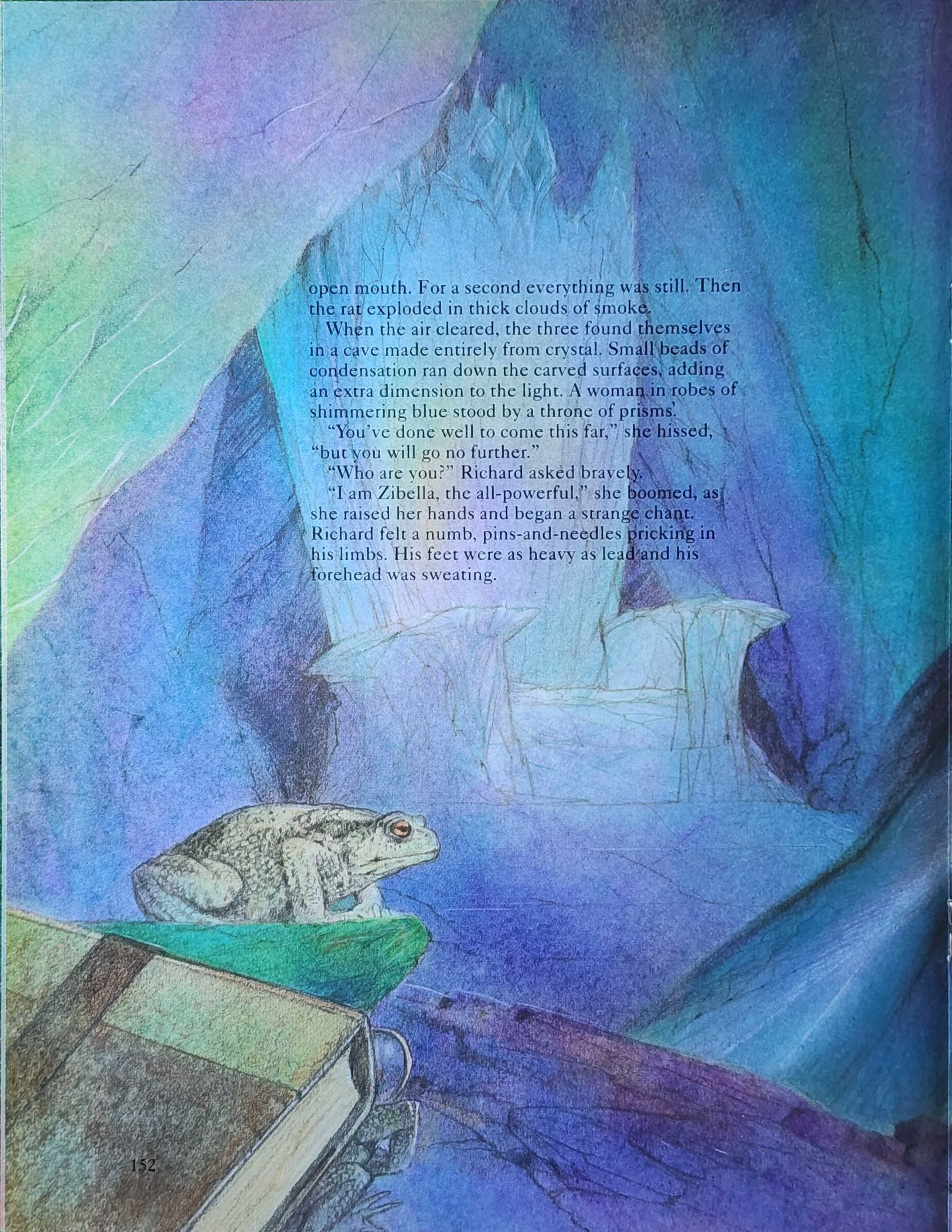
"It's a trick," he called to Orkan. "Remember the prophecy spoke about nightmares? It must be an illusion of some sort. These things aren't real."

Bursting the bubble

All at once, the rats turned tail and fled, receding into the tunnel like a boiling wave of brown fur. In their place came a slithering noise, interspersed with strange scraping sounds. Then, into their field of vision crept the biggest rat any of them had ever seen.

If it was all an illusion, Richard thought to himself, then they needed to burst it like a balloon. He drew his dagger and flung it straight at the giant rat's vicious-looking face.

Richard's aim was true. The dagger sunk into the rat's eye, but the creature did not disappear. Instead it swelled – bigger and bigger, bulging against the rock, until its insides burst under the strain. Blood slopped from its



open mouth. For a second everything was still. Then the rat exploded in thick clouds of smoke.

When the air cleared, the three found themselves in a cave made entirely from crystal. Small beads of condensation ran down the carved surfaces, adding an extra dimension to the light. A woman in robes of shimmering blue stood by a throne of prisms.

"You've done well to come this far," she hissed, "but you will go no further."

"Who are you?" Richard asked bravely.

"I am Zibella, the all-powerful," she boomed, as she raised her hands and began a strange chant. Richard felt a numb, pins-and-needles pricking in his limbs. His feet were as heavy as lead and his forehead was sweating.

Streaks of cold, blue light lanced from her fingertips as Zibella stopped chanting, and shouted, "Here! Now! Forever!"

Richard, Orkan and Melek could not move. The crystal walls seemed to spring away, receding with sickening speed, as if the cave were getting bigger. It was not – but the three were getting smaller. Smaller and greener and wartier and springier and croakier and . . . web-footed!

Richard raised one splay-fingered hand and stared at it through bulging eyes. A thin, black tongue licked out. His tongue! He blinked. Then he hopped.

The movement took him by surprise. He had landed on all fours. Then he saw two toads. One was thin, with spectacles on its nose, and a huge book on its back. The other toad was fatter and angrier, but both had the same puzzled expression.

"What's happening?" Orkan and Melek spoke at the same time.

"Zibella's turned us into toads," Richard replied, forming the words with difficulty.

Reversing the spell

For a while there was chaos, as Orkan hopped about uncontrollably, and Melek struggled from under the book. In the time it took his companions to settle down, Richard sensed Golan's voice telling him to find the *Book of Reversals* and use the magic word from the prophecy.

"Can you remember the prophecy?" Richard asked Melek urgently.

"Of course," the Melek-toad croaked,

and belched the words of the riddle.

"Testament's beginnings see!" Richard croaked as Melek finished. "Join the first letter of each line and we get 'Libertas'. Now we must find the *Book of Reversals*."

They hopped in different directions searching frantically.

It was Melek who finally found the book, encased within a huge crystal. They managed to open the book and flip the pages until they found the spell.

LIBERTAS

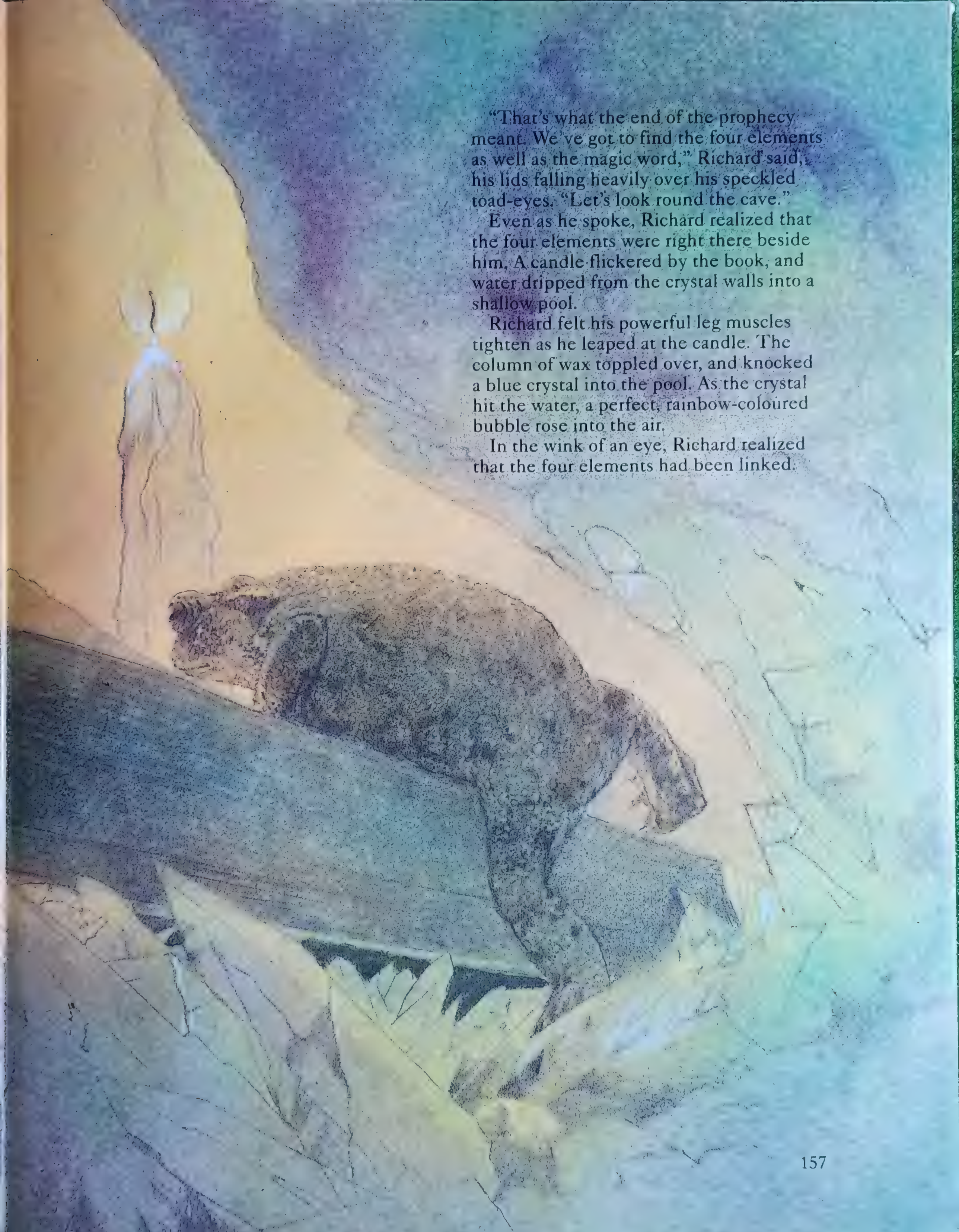
Glean by the Fire of Candlelight,
From Earth a crystal, sparkling bright.
Dip in well Water, a droplet lingers there,
Which turns to a bubble and rides the Air.
Your mortal self awaits the time to rebel,
Shout LIBERTAS
And break the sordid spell.

"That's what the end of the prophecy meant. We've got to find the four elements as well as the magic word," Richard said, his lids falling heavily over his speckled toad-eyes. "Let's look round the cave."

Even as he spoke, Richard realized that the four elements were right there beside him. A candle flickered by the book, and water dripped from the crystal walls into a shallow pool.

Richard felt his powerful leg muscles tighten as he leaped at the candle. The column of wax toppled over, and knocked a blue crystal into the pool. As the crystal hit the water, a perfect, rainbow-coloured bubble rose into the air.

In the wink of an eye, Richard realized that the four elements had been linked.



"Libertas," Richard shouted without hesitation.

As the word left Richard's mouth, time began to unwind in reverse. The crystal walls of the cave seemed to be closing in on them at a terrifying rate. There was a subtle ripping noise, as if a hole had been torn in the very fabric of the air itself. Then all movement ceased. The three were back to their normal shapes. Richard gave an experimental hop and jarred his heels. The magic had worked.

They looked around the cave and saw Zibella perched on her throne of prisms. Her evil, ice-cold stare sent a chill through Richard and Melek, but Orkan's face was puce with rage.

Fearful revenge

Orkan seized his bow, pulled out an arrow and took aim at the glowering witch.

In the micro-second it took for him to release his bow-finger, Zibella had cast another spell. Spurts of flame shot from her fingers and Orkan swivelled, so that his arrow was pointing at Richard. It leaped free with a soft twang.

Her spell was wasted. As soon as he saw her hand rise, Melek had guessed what would happen. His own hand shot out to give Orkan a rough shove. It was enough to spoil the archer's aim. The arrow hissed past Richard's ear and clinked uselessly against a crystal wall.

Disappearing floor

Orkan turned back to his original target. Zibella's calm features were changing. She began to laugh. First softly, then louder. As her squeals filled the air, a large crack split the ground alongside Orkan's feet and he lowered his bow in confusion. A second crack jagged through the floor in front of him. Then another, and another.

The cracks began to widen into gaping crevasses whose edges crumbled and fell in on themselves. Crystal columns teetered and fell. Above it all, the crash of

shattering crystal, the groan of tortured bedrock, the rumble of falling boulders, rang the high, clear screech of Zibella's mad laughter.

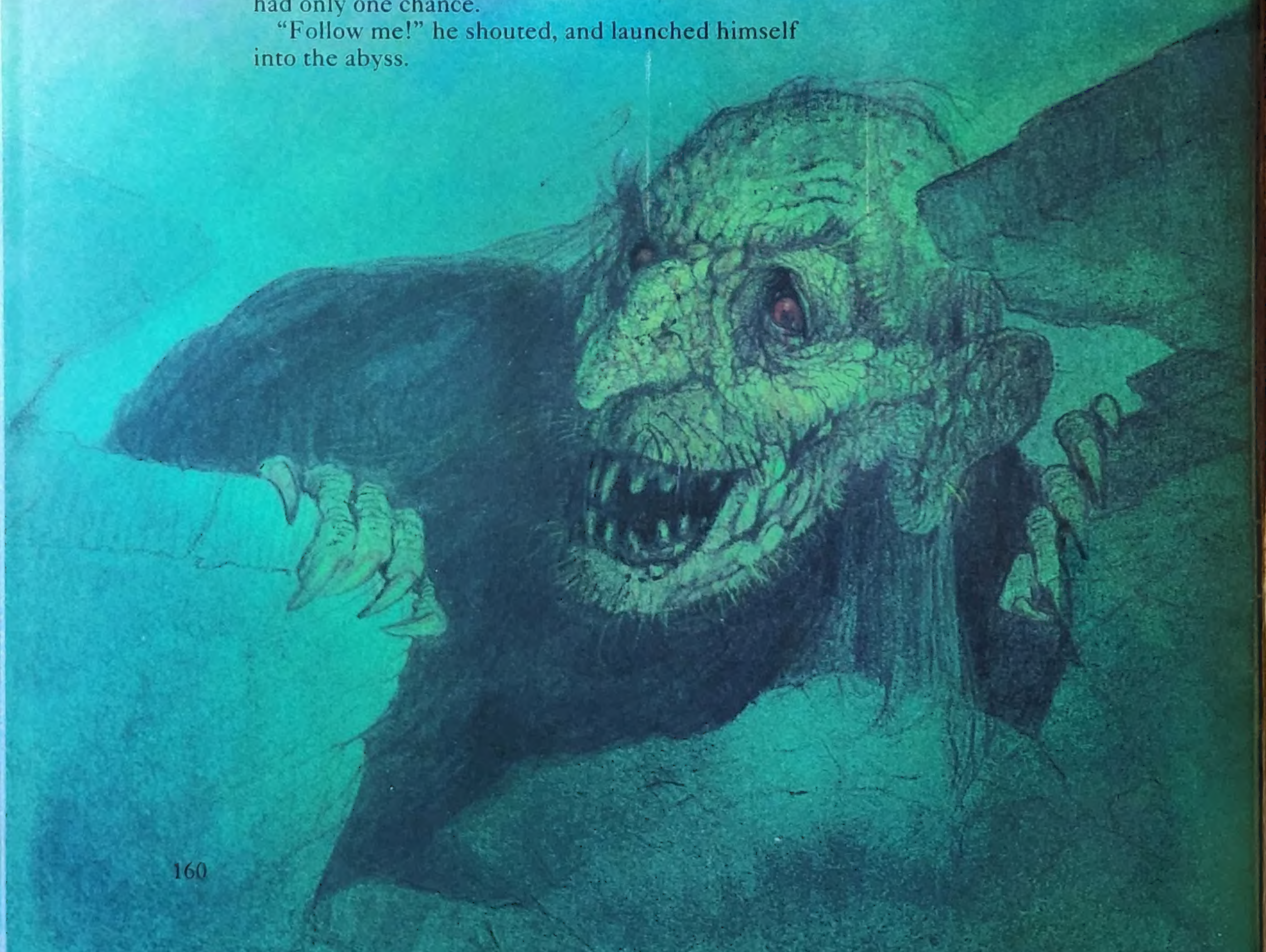
Her mirth came in spurts and jags, ear-splitting cackles of merriment that rang remorselessly through her crystal cavern. At the same time she began to change, her icy beauty turning into the withered features of an old hag.

Victory to the witch?

Zibella's hair thinned and shrank back on her scalp, her cheeks wrinkled and sank, her eyes pouched and glazed over into opaque pebbles. Her whole body hunched over, and even her clothes disintegrated into rags. Soon she was little more than a withered black shape that capered madly from crystal to crystal.

Richard looked around in desperation. The floor had cracked like crazy paving into a number of islands that grew smaller and further apart with each second. They had only one chance.

"Follow me!" he shouted, and launched himself into the abyss.



Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

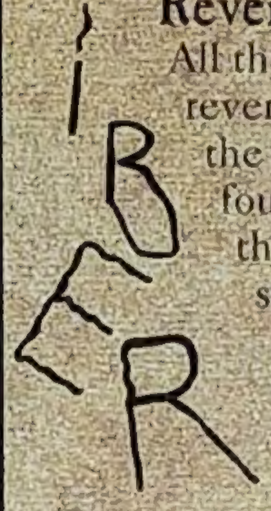
Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They are hiding somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 9, Shoomi and Shoobi could be found on the inside front cover and page 141.

3-Minute Challenge

Reversal Spell

All the elements needed for the reversal spell are hidden in one of the illustrations. Can you find the four elements and the eight letters of the magic word for reversing the spell in less than three minutes?



In issue 9, the fragment of the Evil One's mask was hidden on pages 136-137.

Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again this time!

Monsters and Magic

After you have enjoyed Zibella's Fortress, read about the Rats of Hamelin, Morgan le Fay and The Banshee on your cards from *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic*. Which of the characters do you think Zibella is based on?

In issue 9, the Living Death Traps were based on the Tree of Poisons.

Check your answers in the next issue.

Life Force Pod

Which pod did Richard find in Enlil's Dungeon? Did you spot the clue on page 139 of issue 9? Richard plunged his hands into the acid juices to save the little creature. He had found the Pod of Goodness.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the tokens and keep them safe. More will be given at regular intervals. Details about the role-playing game and how to play it will appear in future issues.

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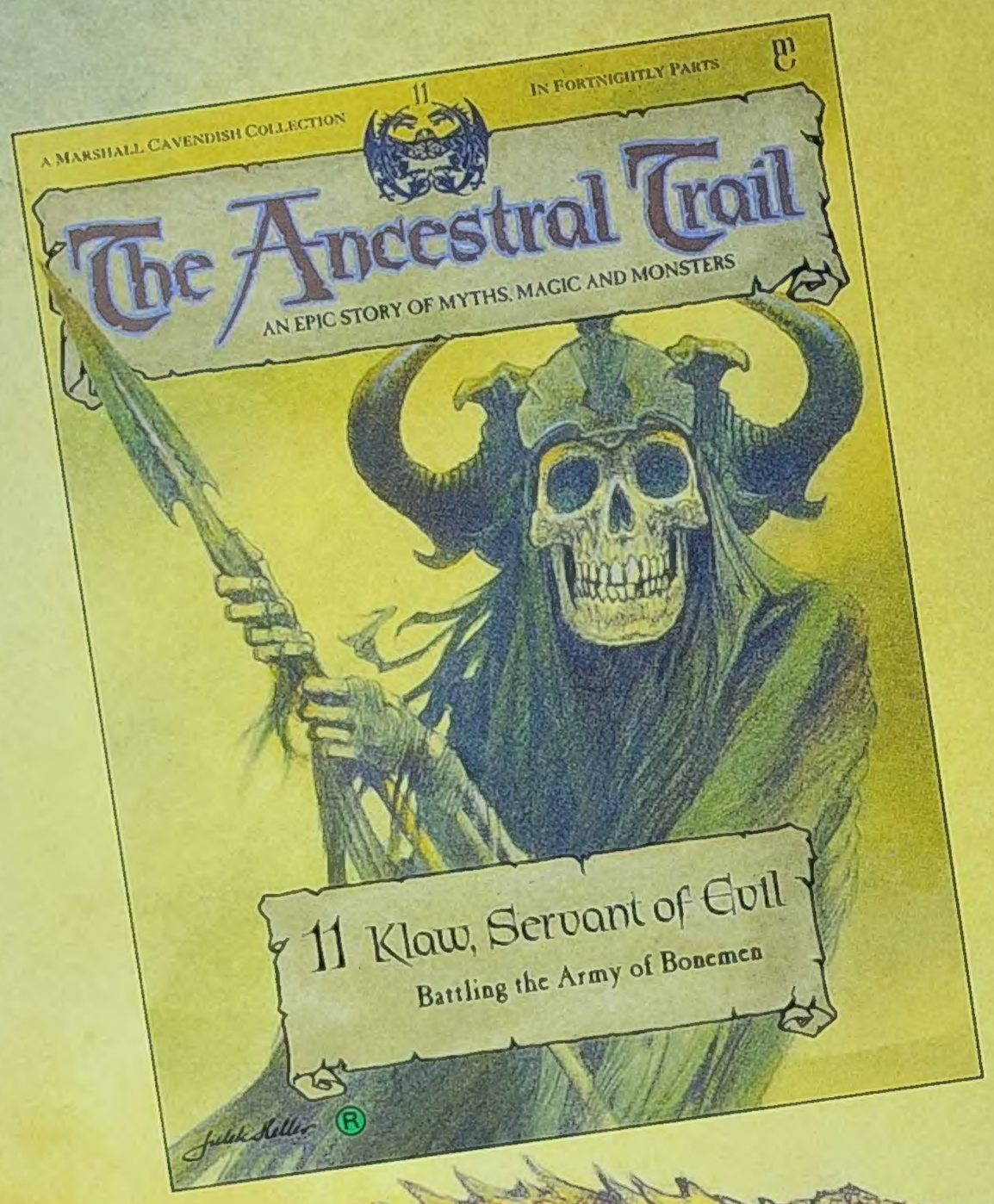

In Issue 11

Klaw, Servant of Evil

Melek braves the Pit of Perils and saves the life of a dying Guardian. Then the trio are confronted by her captor and his hideous bone army.

plus

- Morbane tells us about unearthly creatures who cross the barrier into our world.

- More locator cards and tokens for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

Coming in Issue 12

Scorpions of the Desert

A pod is hidden deep inside Cobra's Keep – but first the heroes must run the gauntlet of deadly scorpion squads who guard Sand City.

plus

From Morbane – two stories about creatures that guard the secrets of immortality • More pieces for the Ancestral World puzzle map.

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